

Cal ALERT
POST's New Division?
the
Allied Law Enforcement Recruitment and Training Division

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it - creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

Same Path to No Solution

Individually and collectively we are failing! Failing to meet the challenges and demands needed to address the growing problem of filling law enforcement vacancies throughout the State of California. While many seemingly recognize the dilemma, our industry continues to forge down the same path, collectively wasting thousands of dollars and thousands of staffing hours while remaining on the same treadmill of unsuccessfully netting any real numbers of officers to meet the demands of our constituents on a more global level.

As noted by Woska, (2006) "Law enforcement agencies throughout the United States are having difficulty filling peace officer positions." (Pg1). With dwindling budgets, an aging work force and enhanced retirement benefits, Chief Executives continue to search for solutions to successfully attract and process recruits and lateral peace officer candidates into their organizations. One might ask, why don't we support and control recruiting at the State level to create a labor pool adequate to serve the future of California law enforcement?

What's the Problem?

As articulated by Switzer in the Recruitment & Retention Best Practices 2006, police managers across the state and around the country tend to recognize and admit the crisis we all face when dealing with the complexity of police recruitment (Switzer 17). Few are actively engaging in the real work; however, needed to address the problem of recruitment on a statewide level (Switzer 17). Since it is projected that between 2002 and 2012 nearly 25,900 police officers will need to be hired to meet the needs of law

enforcement statewide, (Switzer 17) one can quickly see that this issue is not simply a local problem, but one for the state in general.

California's changing demographics (Switzer vii) coupled with the lucrative Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) retirement benefits for peace officers, has created many of our California law enforcement vacancies. This may explain why we have suffered from such an exodus of tenured cops and why agencies have remained understaffed. According to William J. Woska, J.D., Professor at Golden Gate University, "many police departments now find it nearly impossible to fill all police officer positions. In California, for example, police officers can retire at age 50. Peace officers often received retirement benefit of 3% for each year of employment. Thus an individual beginning employment as a police officer at age 21 would have retirement benefit of 87% (29 years multiplied by 3) at age 50. As a result, California police departments have high turnover as increasing numbers of peace officers elected early retirement and an opportunity to return to school play golf travel or begin new careers." (Woska 2006).

In a 2006 report on best practices in recruitment, POST estimated that of the 68,000 law enforcement related positions needing to be filled in California by 2012, nearly 31,000 would be vacancies created as a result of retirement. (Switzer 17). However, this is only part of the story. California continues to grow in dramatic fashion. With an estimated 600,000 people per year migrating to the Golden State (Switzer vii) the State Department of Finance's Demographic Research Unit estimates the State will have an additional 6 million residents in the next ten years. This necessitates expanding the staff at many police agencies, and will further exacerbate the issue of effectively

policing our communities. Unfortunately, for many departments, the means of selecting their newest members has remained largely unchanged for decades.

Complexity of the Problem

The business of entry-level recruitment is highly competitive, expensive and often pits one department against the other. For example, for cities such as Pleasanton, CA, a mid-size city in the Bay Area of California, the cost to conduct the recruitment for 20 Academy Graduate applicants typically runs about \$20,000 in total staff hours. This process would likely yield one or two candidates; however, the cost is the same whether or not a new hire results from the process. The cost of running a pre-academy (entry level) process would be about one third higher due to the additional processes of facilitating examinations such as the written and physical agility test. Even faced with this information, most recruiting efforts remain explored and executed from a local perspective. There has to be a better way.

An April 2006 study released by the police executive research forum (PERF) of 1000 police agencies nationwide it was noted that, "The most commonly reported recruitment methods included newspaper ads, career fairs and the Internet. These were typically done in isolation of other departments, with the majority of agencies reporting that they did not engage in joint recruitment efforts with other law enforcement agencies. The police programs most commonly utilized for (recruitment) were college internships, explorer programs, and school resource officers. Across all the responding agencies, the most commonly targeted group were those with previous police experience, followed by college graduates, racial and ethnic minorities and women. The larger agencies were also more likely to target these groups than the smaller agencies." (Taylor, Kubu, Fridell,

Rees, Jordan Cheney 2006). With the dearth of viable candidates nationally, we still seem to generally stuck in the same rut.

With more than 400 police, sheriffs' and other California law enforcement agencies all competing for the same applicants, the problem of filling the ranks of more than 60,000 new peace officer positions in the next decade needs to be addressed from a much more global perspective. This is made even more complicated because many agencies attempt to fill their ranks from the ranks of neighboring agencies. Alan Deal, one of POST's Assistant Executive Directors, notes that more than 22% of California officers have switched agencies, diluting the priority given to entry-level recruitment. At the same time, the rates of attrition are increasing. Dwayne Orrick, Public Safety Director, City of Cordele, Georgia noted, "Police departments across the country are reporting increased rates of staff turnover. Many agencies are spending enormous amounts of resources on recruiting, selecting, and training new employees. At the same time, they are unable to make progress because they are losing experienced officers to other employers." (Orrick 2009) Given these facts it is easy to glean that we are failing to net any significant increase in the numbers of law enforcement officers statewide.

Competition within the State

It is common for the same entry-level applicants to be involved in a recruitment process with multiple agencies. (Woska 2006). This leads each agency to spend thousands of dollars screening the same applicants including conducting extensive background investigations, medical and polygraph exams. This generally leads to departments competing with each other for the same applicant and allowing them to

choose which department they are most interested in at the completion of the process. For example one research article stated, "Recruiters also began to lament competition from other agencies, noting that recruits can "shop around" for a better salary (Crime Control Digest, 2003) and higher quality equipment" (Baxley, n.d.) This may lead some to use agencies as "stepping stones" to get employed with larger or higher paying agencies down the road. This experience can be a tremendous waste of resources for many departments who may not be able to compete financially with departments who may offer a more competitive benefits package or have the capacity to complete the background investigation in a more expedient manner.

The aggregate cost and loss of productivity in California law enforcement is significant due to the redundant recruitment tasks occurring in each jurisdiction. Many of the law enforcement resources could be better utilized if they could concern themselves with actual police work that would contribute to statewide crime reduction. Instead, many sworn officers across the state are being used to do work that could otherwise be outsourced to a statewide entity. It is for these reasons that this is an issue worth recognizing and attempting to strategically solve.

A Strategy is Required

When faced with the data that nearly 30,000 law enforcement vacancies will need to be filled within the next five years, one can see that what is needed is a labor pool from which to choose applicants. To make any meaningful progress to increase the total numbers of law enforcement officers employed within the State of California,

departments may need to commit to a substantial entry-level recruitment strategy and consider a statewide method to meet this demand.

Given the data that demonstrates the number of current and anticipated vacancies in the law enforcement ranks throughout the State. It is time to address the issue in a proactive and strategic manner and from a more global perspective.

According to the CA POST Recruitment and Retention Best Practices Symposium 2006 Switzer noted, "In one survey, 81% of the respondents agreed that recruitment was a problem for their agencies, yet only 26% have a written strategic plan to address it. Another survey revealed that 91% felt recruitment was an issue for their agency and 67% felt it was a bigger problem than just four years ago. Yet, half of the respondents budget no money for recruitment and another 24% budget less than \$5,000. In terms of retention, 72% of the survey respondents indicated that retention is still an issue and 54% believe it is a bigger problem than four years ago." (Switzer viii). Since it has been well established that the lack of a strategic plan relative to police recruitment and the demands that will be placed upon the state and local jurisdictions in the future is a significant obstacle of any meaningful change should serve as the launching pad for which we can begin.

A larger labor pool needs to be created from which local entities can choose those who best fit their community. The military employs significant emphasis on strategic planning with respect to their current force size and identified needs. Policing can adapt many of the same processes (Raymond, Hickman, Miller & Wong). One option to address the issue of recruitment from a more global perspective is to employ strategies

used by the military that can be leveraged by POST, the various State regional training academies and the California State University System.

Exploring this option could mean that POST would serve as the governing body for the strategic planning process and assist in a statewide recruitment effort ~~in order~~ to create significant labor pool. In fact, according to the December 2008 POST Administrative Progress Report, Executive Director Paul Cappitelli reported that recruitment remains problematic statewide, and that only a small percentage of agencies have developed a plan to address the situation. Due to this, POST has already begun the process to serve as a resource for law enforcement agencies to develop agency specific strategic plans for recruitment.

A New Paradigm in Police Recruitment

John R. Hoyle (1997) reminds us that futurism is the art of peering into the future analyzing trend data and taking risks required to step into the unknown with scenarios of what may occur and what to avoid. In this spirit, POST could take an even more significant role in the future of California law enforcement recruitment. One concept worthy of exploring is to establish a fourth division within POST, which could be referred to as California Allied Law Enforcement Recruitment and Training Division or Cal ALERT. This division could be responsible for police recruitment and training across the state.

Cal ALERT would be responsible for not only developing a strategic plan, but a statewide marketing campaign, to meet the desired demographic needs and generate interest in the law enforcement profession. It could serve as the central clearinghouse for

all applicants and the launching area for those interested in a career in California law enforcement.

According to a survey of more than 850 peace officer training academy recruits from 14 California training centers, two of the most significant issues facing those interested in a law enforcement career are the time the selection process takes and the lack of communication and contact throughout the process (Woska 2006). If Cal ALERT was established it could change the typical recruitment process as previously described from that of a shotgun approach for applicants to a focused and effective process.

In a Cal ALERT recruitment prospective candidates could start by simply applying to a centralized location regardless of where they may want to work in law enforcement. Cal ALERT would be responsible for completing all initial screening and the background investigation of all applicants. This endeavor would not be a small undertaking and could be extremely costly to hire and train fully benefitted screeners and background investigators. In collaboration with agencies and academies, though, these costs can be managed to enhance the return on investment each agency is now experiencing for their recruits.

There are currently 39 regional training academies in the state California. Cal ALERT could partner with these academies to generate clientele who have already been initially screened and provided a background investigation clearance. The financial aspect of this concept could be worked out through a partnership of the California State University system. Whereas those interested in law enforcement career could be enabled in a more streamlined and cohesive process into the academic environment of the police

Academy and allowed to pay for their own training. Some departments may even be able to participate in grant or scholarship sponsors for applicants.

One California police chief noted a significant hurdle to overcome in this endeavor would be to allow local jurisdictions the capacity to hold their own assessment and interview process once the applicants graduated from a POST training facility. Since one of the most significant problems for a small agency is the capacity to send people to the Police Academy because of the risk and financial commitment; they typically rely on laterals. They are unable to conduct large recruitment processes for small number of openings and are unable to create any meaningful labor pool for which they can draw from as needed. Additionally, the process of screening and training takes so long that vacancies are maintained for several months while going through the process of selection. This process could allow applicants who have been previously screened, assessed, investigated and trained to apply locally, thus providing a labor pool for all agencies in California and creating economies of scale throughout local jurisdictions.

Pros and Cons

In a personal interview with POST Director Paul Cappitelli on February 19 2009, the Cal Alert concept was posed for his insight regarding the strengths and any significant hurdles to overcome. (February 18, 2009). Director Cappitelli indicated that under current budget constraints, this solution would be highly unlikely. Cappitelli said it would require a substantial increase in POST staffing to manage such a large-scale collaborative recruiting process. He suggested that a meaningful and imposed cost sharing system may have to occur before any implementation could be considered. Given the fact that nearly 630 law enforcement agencies exist in California, a statewide strategy would have to be

designed in a manner that would meet the needs of all agencies, and that would possibly require hundreds of staff members. Given the size and complexity of each agency in the state this would be a challenging task, according to Cappitelli.

He also noted several issues from a recruitment perspective that make a statewide solution difficult. For example, similar to the recruitment of college athletes to a particular professional team, police recruits are often wooed away from one potential employer by more aggressive tactics and motivated by more lucrative financial contacts of others. Director Cappitelli suggested this is perhaps one of the greatest hurdles, because there is currently no way to “level the playing field” of the competitive forces that exist between California agencies. Issues such as pay disparity and geographical-desirability were among the issues raised. Lastly, he believed it would need to be clearly defined as to when recruiters could contact potential candidates and what limitations could be placed upon the recruits with respect to their discussions with different agencies. He explained departments often seek the most qualified candidates early in the academy and “put patches on them” as soon as possible. In the statewide model, this would somehow need to be monitored and controlled to ensure equity in the recruitment process.

Cappitelli also suggested that, for this strategy to work, the budgeting mechanism would need to be tied to legislation that would make the strategy and POST “economy proof” and immune from economic downturns and legislative politics. This would be a critical component and he indicated it would require total legislative and individual departments’ commitment from a fiscal perspective.

Director Cappitelli maintained that POST currently does not take an active role in the recruitment and hiring of entry level candidates and that each law enforcement agency recruits and hires its own officers. POST has conducted extensive research and continues to provide information to agencies for best practices relative to recruitment and retention. He stated the POST Commission establishes the standards for agencies in the POST Program and ensures that each participating agency maintains that standard. It is within this context that he thought there would be significant benefits to the notion of POST having a greater role in the process. This would enhance POST's capacity to establish standardization at the various academies that would be more uniformly followed throughout the state and between each department. He also believed that this strategy could have a positive impact on the total number of vacancies statewide and that we could grow a much larger labor pool and reduce the time vacancies remained open. Lastly, Cappitelli agreed that some type of regionalization as seen in metropolitan areas could be more closely explored on a statewide basis to meet out the goals of making recruitment much more productive and efficient. He closed his remarks by affirming that "The POST Commission is committed to working with agencies to develop strategies that will assist with this endeavor."

Conclusion

Cappitelli's insight helps clarify the issue; and reaffirms a support to the notion that the status quo can be challenged. With the proper level of political will, positive changes could be made to improve our recruitment strategies. In the interim, agencies should look for ways to improve and become more efficient.

Thinking anew and having the willingness to be future oriented requires taking certain calculated risks. We must be prepared to deal with what is facing us currently and in the future, and consider anew how we might find the 68,000 recruits we need to meet the needs and expectations of our communities. It is not enough that our own ranks are filled. The tide must raise all or we all may fail. The choice is yours, and the time to broach this topic is now.

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